Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Week of November 20, 2006

HEART HEALTH CLAIM A BOON FOR CANOLA GROWERS

The Saskatchewan Canola Growers Association (SCGA) is welcoming news of a powerful new tool to sell canola oil in one of the largest markets in the world.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) recently announced that canola oil can now bear a qualified health claim on its labelling.

Manufacturers can now use the following claim on their products:

Limited and not conclusive scientific evidence suggests that eating about 1.5 tablespoons of canola oil daily may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease due to the unsaturated fat content in canola oil. To achieve this possible benefit, canola oil is to replace a similar amount of saturated fat and not increase the total number of calories you eat in a day.

While the claim may be "qualified," SCGA Executive Director Judie Dyck doesn't think the impact will be.

"It is very exciting, because the U.S. is a big market for canola. We are going to have two more crushing plants in Yorkton, and we will want to be moving more canola oil south. Most of our oil that we crush here now is going into the U.S. marketplace. So when you are going into the market to promote canola oil, you can now include the qualified health claim," explains Dyck.

As the largest generation in the history of the human race ages, the importance of a heart-healthy diet is becoming an evermore prominent consumer demand to which manufacturers are responding.

"Just look at some of the labelling that has occurred in the past few years," says Dyck. "Cholesterol-free, trans fat-free – consumers are becoming more educated, and more people are reading the packaging and the labelling. As consumers become more aware, they will start recognizing that they have to eat healthily, and canola is the healthiest oil."

At seven per cent, canola oil is lowest in saturated fats, and the health benefits of canola have been front and centre in past marketing efforts. However, the USFDA ruling lends credibility to the message.

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"You now have an independent third party that is ratifying what [the canola industry] has been saying for years," says Dyck.

The SCGA is hoping all of this will benefit the bottom line of producers.

"There are a lot of factors happening in canola, including the impact of biodiesel. A million metric tonnes of last year's seed went to Europe for biodiesel. We want to make sure that both the food and fuel markets can be expanded, and we are starting to see the price improve for canola," says Dyck.

Canola Council of Canada president Barb Isman likewise welcomes the USFDA's stamp of approval.

"Canola oil is a good fat. We've said it all along, and now the USFDA agrees. Canola oil provides a simple and affordable way to improve heart health, and that's great news. We're hoping, as an industry, that the claim will encourage more food product designers and manufacturers to use canola oil rather than less healthy choices," says Isman.

Health Canada does not have a similar health claim system, so the U.S. designation will hold no legal weight in this country. However, the USFDA qualified claim will still influence Canadian consumers, since it will likely appear in U.S. advertising or on products that are imported from the States.

Health Canada does approve the following statement regarding canola:

A healthy diet low in saturated and trans fats may reduce the risk of heart disease. Canola oil is low in saturated and trans fats.

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"NOSES THAT KNOW" TURN IN RESEARCH ON HOG BARNS

For 700 days over the last two years, professional sniffers—also known as the "Nasal Rangers"—rode tall in their truck seats, testing the air and sniffing out potential problems with the intensive livestock operations near Good Spirit Lake and the surrounding communities. Their mission: to sniff out offensive odours that could be coming from the nearby operations, from as close as half a kilometre to as far away as six kilometres.

What the hired noses, as well as the other community residents asked to participate, found was that there was not much to smell. "This is a good news story," says Don Walters with the Spirit Creek Watershed Monitoring Committee (SCWMC). "This is about good management, government and community groups forming regulations that are good for the environment and the rural economy. We can all work together."

Walters should know about working together, after spending the last five years involved with the SCWMC. He says the committee was initially formed because residents were concerned about what hog barns operating in the area might bring with them. "Some of us weren't in favour of hog barns at the start," says Walters. "We knew nothing, though, and we learned a lot."

Over the last five years, the SCWMC worked with residents, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and the barn owners to collect baseline data on their community before the barns even went into production. The SCWMC then monitored water and soil quality in the area surrounding the barns, testing for any contaminants and even just unpleasant smells. They hired "Nasal Rangers," who, along with local residents, made up the sniff-test team. "They'd have to get up in the morning and calibrate their noses," jokes Walters. "That creates the standard for odour monitoring."

The SCWMC's five-year report found that some odour was detected two per cent of the time. Out of that portion, 60 per cent of odours reported were rated as a level one or two on a scale of one to five, with one being the least offensive.

The monitoring also yielded some surprising – and important – results about local drinking water: it needed attention regardless of whether hog barns were established in the area. Before the operation began, residents were asked to test their drinking water, with the results staying confidential. "We realized there were some water concerns," said Walters, "which is a good thing, because the people didn't realize it themselves. They'd been drinking it for years."

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The SCWMC will continue to test the soil around the operations for the next six years. Walters says overly wet and rainy seasons over the last couple of years may have affected some of the testing they have been doing, so the group just wants to continue testing to make sure there are no adverse affects. Water testing at Good Spirit Creek (which feeds into Good Spirit Lake) will also continue.

As for the hog barns, Walters says, in the end, they have made the communities of Rama and Buchanan very happy. "We found it's good for the rural economy, and people are happy working there. It kept people here and provided jobs."

Walters says, besides the satisfaction of knowing their communities are working hand-in-hand with the barns to keep their environment clean, they have some home-grown information to go on. "This has given us some very good information that's not from down south, or Denmark, or wherever."

The local information also serves Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food. "Our livestock producers are good stewards of the environment and the report confirms this fact," says Agriculture and Food Minister Mark Wartman. "Growing Saskatchewan's livestock industry is key to stimulating the province's rural economy."

The full results and a copy of the report are available on the SCWMC website at http://spiritcreek.ca.

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OIL AND WATER: DO THEY MIX?

An upcoming conference in Moose Jaw will investigate the connection between irrigation and bio-fuels. The 11th annual Saskatchewan Irrigation Projects Association (SIPA) conference on December 5 and 6 is expected to draw over 100 irrigators.

SIPA Chairman Roger Pederson says the showcase session is called "Bio-fuels and Irrigation: Oil and Water, Do They Mix?"

The session, moderated by agricultural commentator Kevin Hursh, will feature presentations from Lionel LaBelle of the Ethanol Development Council, Judie Dyck of the Biodiesel Development Task Force, John Ippolito from Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food and Keith Rueve from Pound-Maker AgVentures.

Pederson says the goal is to explore how irrigation and bio-fuels can complement one another.

"We think there is a good mix for irrigation with some of the bio-fuels," says Pederson. "Under irrigation, production is much higher than on dry land, and our production on a year-to-year basis is pretty much assured, barring some catastrophe. So it makes the number of acres you need to draw from in order to support those plants less than what it would be in a dry-land situation."

Pederson says there are also transportation advantages if the feedstock for a bio-fuel plant is being drawn from nearby irrigated land.

"With irrigation, you can get more of your product closer to the location of the plant. Transportation is a factor, and obviously, if you do not have to go so far away for the raw product to supply your plant, that should be an advantage. One of the reasons for this topic at the conference is to find out just what those advantages might be," explains Pederson.

While the session is aimed at giving existing irrigators the opportunity to relate this seminar back to their own operations, Pederson says it would be of interest to a much broader audience.

"There have been a lot of meetings about biodiesel and ethanol, but I think none quite like this one. We hope that it will answer some specific questions for irrigation farmers, but it will be useful information whether you are a dry-land farmer or an irrigation farmer," says Pederson.

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Anyone interested in attending the conference can register online at www.irrigationsaskatchewan.com, or call Sandra Bathgate at (306) 796-4420.

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SASKATCHEWAN GOAT BREEDERS WORKING TO GROW SECTOR

As producers seek new and innovative ways to diversify, the Saskatchewan Goat Breeders Association invites them to "think goat."

The association's president is Guenette Bautz, who raises goats for both the meat and milk markets on her Country Log Ranch near Middle Lake in the Humboldt area.

"Saskatchewan is the perfect place to raise goats in terms of land base and cost of production," says Bautz. "Goats are a good option for diversification."

The goat industry has three main operation sectors: dairy, meat and mohair, which can add diversification to any agricultural operation.

Bautz and husband Ryan started with a grain and cattle operation. After much research, she concluded goats would be the perfect addition to their farm. Now, some six years later, she is the owner of approximately 130 breeding stock for meat production, and a further 50 animals that produce milk and associated products. In fact, the Country Log Ranch operates the only health-district-approved Category 2 goat milk dairy in Saskatchewan.

"We recognize the need for a processing plant to further develop the milk industry in our province. We are, therefore, currently investigating and submitting plans to expand our operation into a processing plant that would enable us to transform goats' milk into other dairy products such as yogurt, cheese, butter and ice cream," Bautz says.

She says consumers are attracted by the health benefits of goats' milk, which is produced without any additives, hormones or stimulants. It has much lower lactose content than cows' milk or human mothers' milk, and is well-tolerated by those who suffer from certain intestinal disorders and infants whose digestive systems have not yet fully matured. Live animals are currently shipped out of province for finishing and processing, with meat distributed at the farm gate or through local stores.

According to the latest available Statistics Canada data, there are approximately 16,000 goats in the Saskatchewan herd. Because there are many hobbyists keeping only a few animals, it is difficult to estimate the total number of producers in the province.

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For a milk producer, approximately 40 animals are required to start, with the herd growing to about 50 milking does if the producer wishes to make a living solely on the dairy side. The largest single meat herd in the province numbers some 400 goats. There are currently 63 members in the Saskatchewan Goat Breeders Association, and they are very willing to share what they have learned with producers who may be interested in getting into the sector.

Bautz describes the stock as "easy to manage and safe with kids," making them a perfect alternative for any family farm. They are browsers of widely available natural pastures, feeding on grasses, leaves, brush and even bark. They also graze well alongside cattle.

On her operation, she has an unusual helper, a llama named "Peace." "Not only does she herd them back from pasture, but she also patrols the perimeter of their enclosure like a sentry," said Bautz. While dogs are commonly used to assist in herding, young llamas will bond with the goats and demonstrate strong protective instincts. "She is an effective deterrent to predators like coyotes," Bautz adds.

Goat breeding offers a great opportunity for new producers to enter the business, with markets still being established in Canada and a shortage of supply to meet demand. Saskatchewan breeders are also members of the Canadian National Goat Breeders Association, which is building education resources for its members across the country, and implementing important initiatives such as on-farm food safety and a national traceability program.

Bautz will be showing her animals at Canadian Western Agribition, and says she looks forward to talking to interested producers about the Saskatchewan Goat Breeders Association and topics like dairy, meat and fibre production.

More information is available through the Bautz operation website, www.milkandmore.ca, and she welcomes customer and producer inquiries via her e-mail address, info@countrylogranch.com.

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ISSUES AND ACTION PLANS FOR RURAL WOMEN THE FOCUS OF CONFERENCE

A series of meetings throughout Saskatchewan will culminate with the "Rural Women's Policy Forum" November 24-26 in Muenster. The process began with a grant from Status of Women Canada to fund a project called "Empowering Rural Women's Voices." The program has been co-ordinated through the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence at the University of Regina.

"The rural women's issues committee is a result of a seminar put on by the centre," says policy analyst and committee member Joanne Havelock. "We had participated with other centres across Canada in a national study of women living in rural, remote and northern locations. So we decided to follow up the recommendations of that study, to see how they relate particularly to Saskatchewan."

After an initial workshop in Young focusing on rural women's health issues, the participants expressed a desire to make that kind of opportunity available to other women across the province. Along with Havelock, they put together the committee and sought out the grant money to fund further activity. Starting about two years ago, the committee sponsored workshops in Nipawin, Swift Current, Carlyle, Unity and Christopher Lake.

"We've talked about what is affecting women's well-being, and that of their families and communities," says Havelock. "It's an evening and a day, and we start by asking participants what is the thing they're most proud of accomplishing. It can range from putting nutritious meals on the table for the family, to running for council, to jumping off the high-diving board. The point is that women do a lot and accomplish a lot, and should be very proud of what they've done."

The workshops seek to identify what issues are affecting the local community, and ask those attending to imagine a new vision of how things can change if that issue is resolved. The participants are challenged to generate action lists to move toward those new visions. Each workshop has attracted 15 to 25 women, from farms and small rural communities.

"Each workshop has its own individual report, which is available on our website," says Havelock. "We will pull together a comprehensive report after the November forum."

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The Rural Women's Policy Forum will be held at St. Peter's College in Muenster, and remains open to registration. The agenda calls for sessions to be held on a variety of topics, such as Women and Leadership, Women in the Rural Economy, and Health Care. Havelock says organizers hope to see positive actions by participants to resolve issues in their communities when they return home.

The forum is free for participants, with mileage, food and accommodation all covered by the program grant. Registration information is available by calling Joanne Havelock at the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, (306) 585-5727.

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